From: Daly, Carl [Daly.Carl@epa.gov]
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To: Benevento, Douglas [benevento.douglas@epa.gov]
CC: Hestmark, Martin [Hestmark.Martin@epa.gov]
Subject: FW: Dave MacNeill praise for Region 8 Staff

Carl Daly, Deputy Assistant Regional Administrator Office of Partnerships and Regulatory Assistance EPA, Region 8 303-312-6416

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Utah regulators say lax Trump EPA rules actually helping air quality



Leia Larsen Standard-Examiner

OGDEN — Despite alarms being sounded nationally by environmental advocates, Utah regulators say the Trump administration's U.S. Environmental Protection Agency hasn't done much to derail efforts in improving the state's air quality.

This week, the Utah Department of Environmental Quality fielded numerous questions from concerned citizens and reporters after the EPA announced plans to rollback Obama-era fuel efficiency standards. Last year, air quality advocates decried the EPA's efforts to repeal the Clean Power Plan. Utah's air quality regulators say neither of the two moves will have a major impact on the state's efforts to cut emissions from cars or coalburning power plants.

In fact, one regulator said the new EPA under Administrator Scott Pruitt is making it easier for Utah to clear its air.

"That's what I'm noticing. I've been doing this for 37 years and this is probably the most reasonable regional staff we've had," said Dave McNeill, planning manager for the Division of Air Quality.

Vehicle pollution change

First, the new fuel efficiency changes. The EPA signaled Monday that it would curb a fuel economy standard for new vehicles, model years 2022 to 2025. That standard is meant to reduce the amount of greenhouse gas coming from the nation's cars and light trucks — the largest source of carbon dioxide emissions in the U.S.

The following day, Salt Lake City-based refinery Andeavor (formerly Tesoro) held a groundbreaking ceremony to develop its new Tier 3 refinery. The refinery is moving forward with producing those cleaner, low-sulfur fuels despite no federal mandate to do so.

Some Utahns, however, seemed to mix up the two news events. They deal with different types of pollution.

"I think a lot of folks are confused," said Glad Sowards, policy analyst with the Department of Environmental Quality. "If all they (the EPA) change is CO2, the fuel requirement, there probably won't be a huge effect locally."

The fuel economy standard being evaluated by the EPA deals mostly with CO2, which is tied to global warming.

Meanwhile, the new Tier 3 standards will more closely address the pollutants that contribute to Utah's wintertime particulate and summertime ozone problems, Sowards said.

Tier 3 standards require larger refineries to create cleaner fuels and car manufacturers to build new vehicles with better emissions controls. Combined, the Tier 3 technologies will work together to reduce the pollutants that mix to form fine particulates and ozone.

The Trump administration so far hasn't given any indication that it plans to review EPA's Tier 3 standards, which were adopted in 2014.

Power plant changes

As for the Clean Power Plan, Utah would have needed to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 37 percent by 2030. Sowards said the state is on-target to meeting those goals anyway.

Utah regulators and power providers were looking at a cap-and-trade system of meeting their state requirements. The plan was stayed in federal court ahead of the 2016 election and President Donald Trump almost immediately began working to replace it after assuming office.

Then the Intermountain Power Plant in Delta announced plans to close its coal plant and convert to natural gas by 2025 after losing its Southern California market.

"It's dramatically bigger than any other power plant in Utah," Sowards said.

In 2015, a smaller, more inefficient plant closed, too — the Carbon Plant in Helper. Those two plants created more than a third of Utah's power plant CO2 emissions, so the state is set to more than meet the Clean Power Plan requirements due to economic forces.

"I can't say in every state that was the case, but it seemed to me the previous administration looked at what was likely to happen in every state anyway," Sowards said. "What's really put the screws on coal, as it were, is natural gas prices are so cheap from fracking. Coal is not as competitive as it once was."

EPA problems

That's not to say Trump's EPA doesn't raise serious concerns among Utah's environmental watchdogs.

Scott Williams with HEAL Utah is especially concerned with the agency's recent anti-science actions. Administrator Pruitt has repeatedly questioned or denied scientists' consensus about human-caused climate change. Pruitt also announced last month his intention to bar the EPA from using studies with non-public information — like sensitive medical data — in its policymaking decisions.

"Basically it was a way for him to have to avoid using any rigorous science from reputable organizations," said Williams, who is also a physician.

Environmental groups also worry about EPA inspection and enforcement work that isn't being done as the agency staff becomes increasingly disgruntled, cut or put on a hiring freeze.

Joro Walker with Western Resource Advocates said Pruitt has worked to "vilify" the agency he oversees.

"I think that the overall atmosphere is one of criticism of an agency that has done a lot to protect our health and improve public health ... to improve people's quality of life. EPA has done tremendous things," she said.

The administration's perceived aversion to more regulation and efforts to loosen control could hamper EPA's mission.

"People think 'regulation' is a dirty word, but regulations are a balance of economics and health," Williams said. "We need to make sure we maintain that balance."

The status of Utah's non-attainment

Still, the Division of Air Quality hasn't stopped its efforts to work with the EPA and meet federal air quality requirements. Specifically, the Wasatch Front was slapped with "serious" non-attainment status for PM 2.5 pollution last year, and it's likely in non-attainment after the EPA approved stiffer ozone standards in 2015.

That's why McNeill says he's relieved to have a new administration that's flexible.

He said Utah's non-attainment areas for fine particulate pollution met federal standards in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017 — right after being declared in serious non-attainment.

New EPA staff, however, are willing to work with his division, McNeill said. Although the state had a deadline to submit a State Implementation Plan detailing ways to address its serious non-attainment, those federal officials allowed the deadline to pass and are giving the air quality department time to develop solutions, particularly as new air quality standards are being challenged, reviewed and rewritten.

"The old administration was afraid to admit success," McNeill said. "They were always looking for a way to say it failed. The new guys are looking for ways to say 'success.""

Contact Reporter Leia Larsen at 801-625-4289 or llarsen@standard.net. Follow her on Facebook.com/leiainthefield or on Twitter @LeiaLarsen.